

Washington, DC – Congressman Steny Hoyer (D-MD) today urged support for a comprehensive dental benefit under Medicaid's State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) as House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee conducted a hearing on children's dental health. Reauthorization of SCHIP is a top priority for Hoyer and House Democrats this year as well as the nation's Governors, who rely on the program to help their states provide health care coverage for uninsured children in low-income families. Earlier this month, Hoyer and members of the Maryland Congressional Delegation sent a letter to the Committee seeking support for a comprehensive dental benefit under SCHIP.

Highlighting how critical oral care is as a component of children's health is the [story of Deamonte Driver](#)

, a 12-year old boy from Prince George's County, Maryland, who died from a brain infection brought on by an abscessed tooth. Although Deamonte's tooth could have been easily treated with a routine extraction, he did not receive timely medical attention primarily because of Medicaid coverage and access problems.

"Last month, I was greatly saddened and appalled to hear of the tragic and preventable death of 12-year-old Deamonte Driver of Prince George's County," said Hoyer. "It is simply unacceptable that in a country as prosperous as ours, a child could be at risk of losing his or her life on account of a treatable toothache. Deamonte's story is a stark reminder of what is at stake and should serve as a clarion call for reaffirming our commitment to ensuring comprehensive coverage for all of America's children."

The grim reality is that for many low-income families like Deamonte's dental care is out of reach. Coverage under Medicaid's State Children's Health Insurance Program varies from state to state, and even in states that provide dental services, such as in Maryland, too few dentists participate because of low reimbursement rates. As a result, less than one in three children enrolled in Maryland's Medicaid program receive dental care, and only 900 of the state's 5,500 dentists accept Medicaid.

In the United States today, oral disease is the most prevalent chronic disease of children, and 80 percent of dental decay occurs in 25 percent of children, primarily low-income and minority children. Not surprisingly dental care tops parents' list of health care concerns. Low-income children are twice as likely to suffer from dental disease as children from higher income families because of their lack of access to dental health care.

“I commend this Subcommittee for highlighting this grave situation,” Hoyer concluded in his statement. “As Congress takes up the reauthorization of SCHIP, I look forward to working with Chairman Dingell and the members of this committee to ensure that eligible children are enrolled and receive adequate health care. That includes providing children with the preventative dental care and access to providers that they need.”

Last week, the House passed an emergency supplemental spending bill that provided \$750 million for states with SCHIP budget shortfalls, including Maryland. This week, the House will consider a Democratic budget plan that fully funds SCHIP and includes an increase of \$50 billion to expand children’s health insurance to cover millions of additional uninsured children. Reauthorization of the program is expected to occur this summer.

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